

GOVERNMENT OF THE



PROVINCE OF ALBERTA

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR TRAPPERS

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# THE FROST DRYING METHOD OF PREPARING BEAVER PELTS

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DEPARTMENT OF LANDS AND FORESTS  
Fish and Wildlife Division



## THE FROST DRYING METHOD OF PREPARING BEAVER PELTS

The skill and care exercised in skinning and preparing a pelt for market are very important for they have a decided bearing on its ultimate value. Clean, well-handled pelts will command more money than those which are mutilated, dirty or badly handled.

The method outlined herein is widely used by Indian trappers - or rather their wives - and the art has reached a high degree of perfection amongst the Crees in the East Coast district of James Bay. The method is used for all species of fur that are stretched open, but as the heading indicates this submission will deal only with the preparation of beaver pelts.

### Skinning

Beaver are skinned 'open', that is the pelt has been slit down the belly in skinning instead of removed intact as in 'cased' pelts where the pelt is slit only down the inside of the hind legs to the vent. In skinning beaver, lay the animal on its back and, using a very sharp knife, slit the pelt starting at the lower lip and cutting in a straight line down the chest and belly to the vent.

Cut off the legs at the first joint and pull them through leaving four round holes in the pelt. The tail is cut off where it meets the fur. Particular care is taken in skinning around the eyes and lips to prevent mutilation, but in general beaver pelts are not skinned quite as cleanly as fine fur pelts for reasons which will become apparent later in this paper.

### Fleshing

After skinning, the pelt is laid fur side down on a flat surface and tepid water is rubbed on the flesh side of the pelt with the palm of the hand. This removes any blood that has been smeared on the pelt during the skinning process and removes the red coloring from any flesh still adhering to the pelt. Similarly, a piece of beef washed in water will have a pale and whitish appearance. If the blood is not removed the pelt sometimes becomes permanently blood stained with an understandable reduction in its market value.

### Stretching

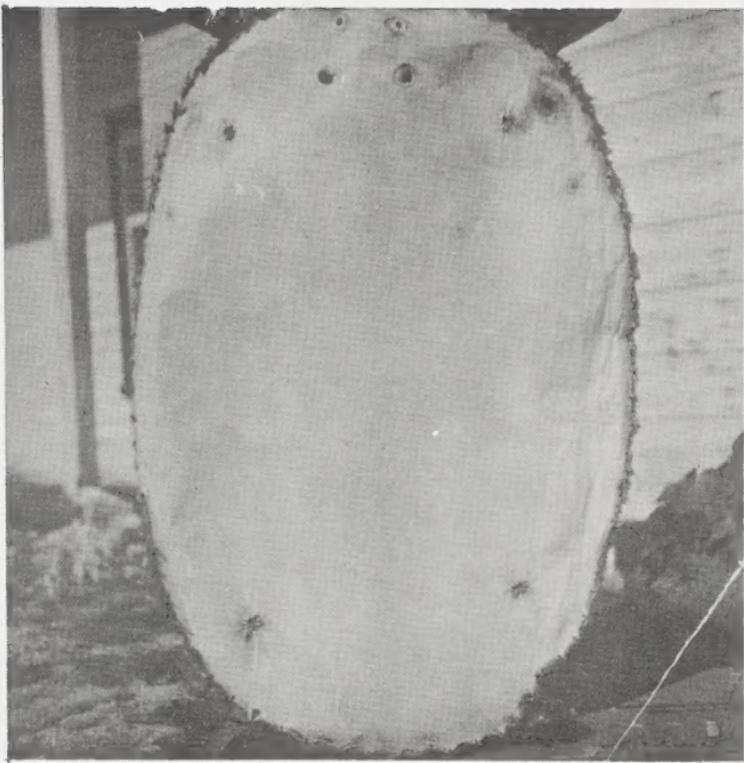
When the pelt has been thoroughly cleaned as outlined above, stretch it by lacing it on a hoop type stretcher which, because it permits the free circulation of air around the pelt, is preferable to the widely used practice of tacking the pelt on a flat board or table type stretcher. The hoop is formed by taking two trimmed saplings - usually alder or willow - and lashing the butt ends securely together with an overlap of about eight inches after which the tops are bent together and lashed with a corresponding overlap. The result is an oblong hoop slightly larger than the pelt to be stretched and strong enough to hold its shape. This is assured by selecting saplings about 1 1/2" at the butt.

The pelt is now laid within the hoop and, using a large sail-maker's needle and number five bailing twine, is laced to the hoop, starting at the mouth and continuing outwards until a point opposite the front leg holes is reached. Next this process is repeated at the other end, starting at the centre and continuing until opposite the holes left by the removal of the hind legs. These two steps give the pelt its length and width is accomplished by stitching in the sides of the pelt again starting at the centre and working both ways to join the previous stitching.

The great care exercised by the James Bay Indians in this stage of preparing their beaver pelts enhances the pleasing appearance of the finished product. The stitches are uniformly placed and not more than one inch apart and, while avoiding overstretching, they pull the pelt evenly, taking out all wrinkles with the result that a pelt not subject to any deduction in measuring is produced. In the case of the Old Factory natives pelts are almost square, and in the case of the Nottaway natives, they are oblong with only the corners rounded. Always avoid turning out any of the distorted fishtail and diamond shaped pelts that are too prevalent on the market.

### Scraping

After stretching the pelt is placed outside to freeze and is generally hung by the hoop either from a rack or from the lower branches of an evergreen where it is shaded from the direct rays of the sun. In a day or so at below freezing temperatures the pelt is ready for the first scraping which is done outside while it is still in the frozen state. To do this the pelt, still laced to the hoop, is stood on end against a support and scraped from top to bottom using long continuous strokes with a scraper grasped in both hands. The scraper is made in the shape of the capital 'L' and has a bevelled cutting edge like an adze to which it bears



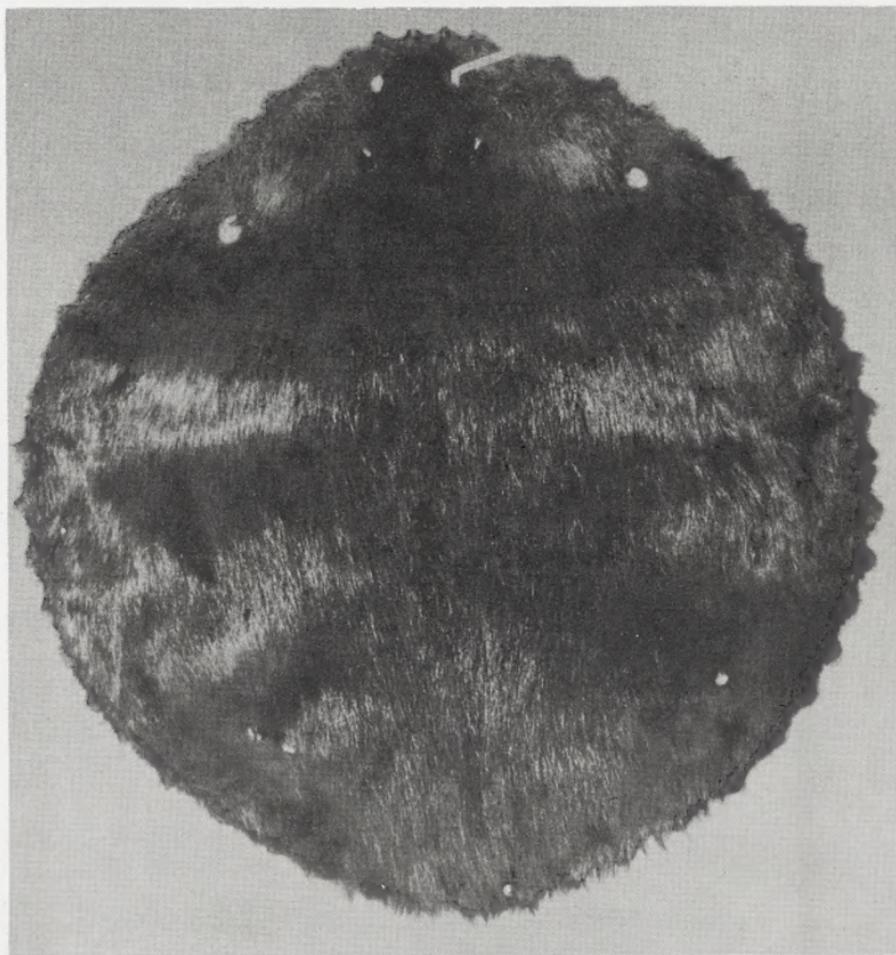
**WELL HANDLED BEAVER PELT**

**Note shape of pelt and the closing up  
of leg holes.**



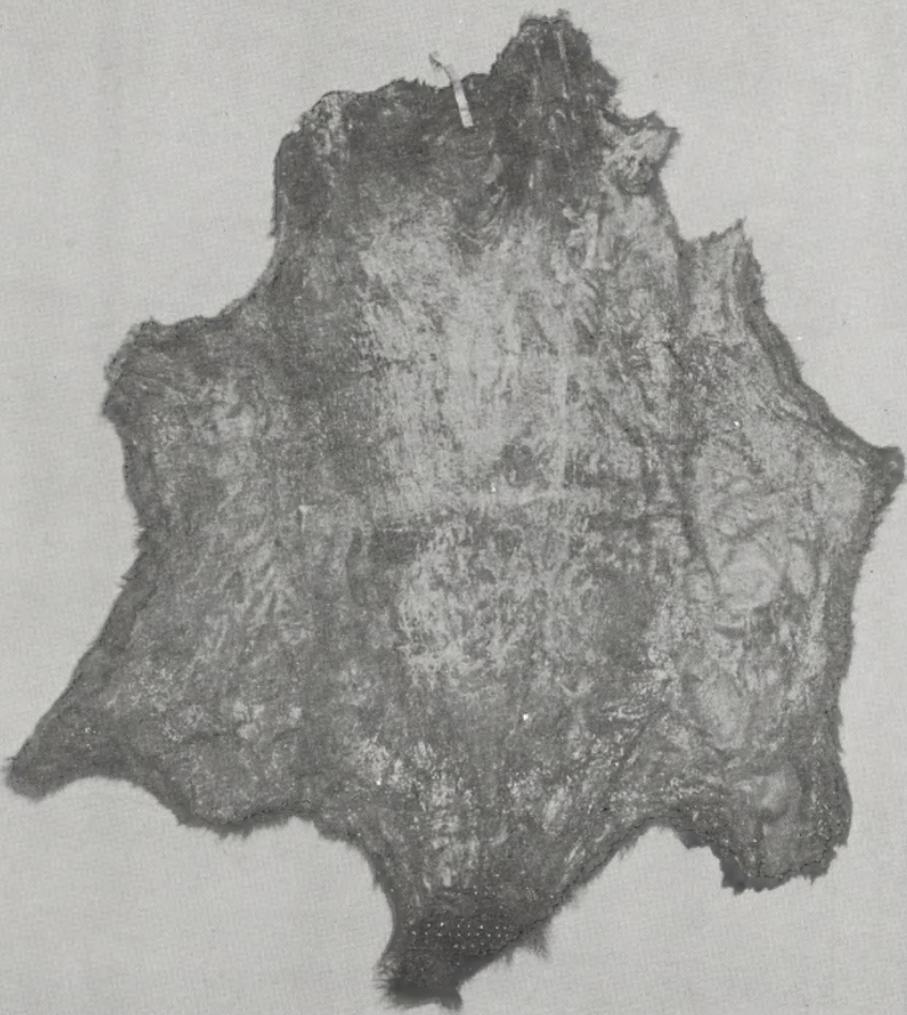
WELL HANDLED BEAVER PELT

Note shape of pelt and the closing up of leg holes.



WELL HANDLED BEAVER PELT

Note shape of pelt and the closing up of leg holes.



POORLY HANDLED BEAVER PELT

*Pelt is almost worthless.*

in miniaturé more than a superficial resemblance. The handle is from ten to twelve inches long and the blade about 1 1/2 inches wide, bevelled very slightly towards the outer corners which are rounded to prevent nicking or scratching the hide. With each stroke of the scraper a ribbon-like strip of fat or flesh is removed and scraping is continued until the leather itself makes its appearance. Great care is taken in the final stages lest the pelt be damaged by scraping too thin. However, the leather may be readily distinguished from the material that should be removed since it shows a more definite grain and is much more resistant to the scraper.

### Cleaning

Only when the scraping has been completed is the pelt taken inside and allowed to thaw out gradually and always away from the direct source of heat. When the pelt has thawed out fully it is quite damp and, using only this moisture, toilet soap is rubbed into the leather, working up a slight lather. Laundry soap is never used since it gives the hide a yellowish tinge. The last vestige of this lather and moisture is then scraped out of the hide using a dull half-moon shaped scraper - often made from the shoulder blade of caribou - since the use of a bone scraper lessens the danger of cutting at this stage of the process.

This is possibly the most important stage in the whole procedure and any lack of care will spoil the appearance of the pelt. Many of the pelts turned out by newcomers to this process are graded as stale simply because either laundry soap was used or final scraping was not continued long enough to completely remove the soap film or residue from the leather.

Scraping and cleaning tends to loosen the pelt so it is next tightened into final form - again avoiding overstretching - and the leg holes are sewn closed; after which it is once more placed outside to freeze where the frost will remove the remaining particles of moisture. This takes about two days after which the pelt, still on the stretcher, is brought into the tent or camp and allowed to thaw out away from the heat. In thawing out a very light film of moisture forms on the leather and as soon as this dampness has dried the pelt is removed from the stretcher and the process is complete.

Even though a first grade pelt has been produced it can still be spoiled by such lack of care as storing in a warm place which can cause taint or hair slip; by folding, which can cause cracking during the tanning

process or by leaving the pelt exposed to vermin and mice. Along the East Coast beaver pelts are always rolled and generally placed in bags and left outside in the food cache where they are protected from the elements and safe from mice or birds.

Considerable time has been taken in setting out details of the process but the main points can be summarized quite briefly:

1. Skin cleanly but not too closely. The more flesh removed in skinning the less the pelt will have to be scraped.
2. Immediately after skinning wash the pelt to remove blood, using lukewarm water.
3. Use care in stretching pelt to symmetrical lines and natural oblong oval shape.
4. Use sharp scraper in fleshing, taking off all fat and flesh but exercising care to not scrape away any of the leather.
5. Wash using only fine toilet soap and scrape again, removing all traces of lather and moisture.
6. Tighten and sew up leg holes - avoid stretching.
7. Never at any time expose the pelt to direct heat or sunlight.
8. Roll pelts and store in a cold, dry place away from rodents and pests.
9. When placing pelts together, do so with the fur sides facing one another or the flesh sides facing one another.

The main principle to be remembered is to use care and more care all the way through the various stages of the process so that the final product will be a clean leathered, lustrous furred skin of symmetrical shape commanding a premium price on the market. This will amply repay the trapper for the time and energy required to turn it out.



